

Deliberative Preparation of Strategic Decisions

Core Ideas from the Work of Přemysl Pergler (documents from 1994–2024)

This English-language summary was prepared from seven reports (in Czech) on the preparation of background materials for government policy and strategic decisions, drawing on decades of practical experience in the Czech Republic and internationally.

This summary was prepared by AI (Claude) with oversight and guidance from Martin Pergler. However it has not been human-reviewed or edited in detail. The objective is not a complete or faithful reproduction of, or critical commentary on, P. Pergler's ideas; rather an indicative summary to help potential English-speaking readers decide if they wish to pursue further. All the Czech-language PDF documents are amenable to (human- or AI-assisted) translation.

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1. The "First Mechanism of Democracy"

Elections are typically treated as *the* mechanism of democracy. But Pergler argues there is an equally important and chronologically prior mechanism: the process by which decisions are actually prepared before anyone votes or decides. If the background materials, analysis, and options presented to decision-makers are biased, incomplete, or arrived at through a closed process, then the democratic decision itself is compromised — no matter how fair the vote.

This "first mechanism" — the preparation and approval of proposed decisions — is where democratic legitimacy is actually built or lost. Strengthening it requires that the process by which strategies, laws, and major decisions are prepared is itself transparent, inclusive, and structured to resist distortion.

Why this matters broadly: Most governance reform focuses on accountability, transparency of *outcomes*, or electoral mechanics. Pergler's framing redirects attention upstream — to the analytical and deliberative process that shapes what options reach the decision-maker's desk in the first place.

2. Deliberative Preparation: Cooperation Before Decision

The central methodological proposal is what Pergler calls "deliberative preparation" (*deliberativní příprava*), rooted in the Latin *deliberare* — to think and consider together.

The core principle is deceptively simple: **first understand each other, then identify agreements and disagreements, then formulate compared alternatives for the decision-maker.** In practice, this means:

- All stakeholders — experts, civil servants, NGOs, unions, citizens, opposition voices — are actively involved from the very beginning of the preparation process, not consulted at the end.
- The process is explicitly designed to separate *preparation* (which should be collaborative) from *decision-making* (which involves power). The preparation phase aims to minimize power struggles and maximize cooperation; the decision phase is where political choice happens.
- Outputs take the form of **compared alternatives** (*porovnané varianty*), not a single recommended option. Each alternative includes verifiable objectives, assigned responsibilities, estimated impacts (including financial), and an assessment of external influences and risks.
- A **null variant** — what happens if no decision is made or action is deferred — is always included. Its absence is considered a significant methodological error, because inaction has consequences that decision-makers often fail to anticipate.

Why this matters broadly: Many policy processes produce a single staff recommendation and treat consultation as a compliance step. The deliberative approach reframes preparation as genuinely collaborative sensemaking, with the explicit goal of presenting decision-makers with meaningfully different options and their trade-offs.

3. Variant Comparison as a Safeguard

One of the most persistent themes across all the reports is that **presenting a single proposal to a decision-maker is almost always a mistake**. The reasons are both practical and democratic:

- A single proposal forces the decision-maker into a binary accept/reject choice, losing the nuance of trade-offs.
- It concentrates power in whoever drafted the proposal, because the framing and assumptions embedded in a single option are invisible.
- It makes the process vulnerable to capture by those with the strongest existing position or the loudest voice.

Compared variants should differ meaningfully — not merely be cosmetic variations. Each should clearly articulate: what actions are proposed, who is responsible, what the expected impacts are (including probabilistic estimates), and what external conditions could change the outcome.

Why this matters broadly: This principle applies well beyond government. In corporate strategy, investment decisions, urban planning, or international development — anywhere complex decisions are made — the discipline of formulating and comparing genuinely different options improves both the quality of decisions and their legitimacy.

4. Risk and Uncertainty as Integral, Not Optional

Pergler argues that strategic work in the public sector routinely underestimates or ignores uncertainty. Decisions are presented as if the future is knowable, when in fact both external developments and the impacts of proposed actions are uncertain and may involve surprises.

The reports advocate integrating **risk analysis** — drawn from its more mature applications in finance, engineering, and the private sector — into the deliberative preparation process. Key ideas include:

- Every proposed strategy should include probabilistic estimates of outcomes under different external scenarios, not just a single "expected" trajectory.
- Risk is distinguished from uncertainty: risk involves situations where there is a baseline expectation but things may turn out differently; uncertainty involves situations where the baseline itself is unclear.
- The deliberative approach is particularly well-suited to handling risk, because comparing variants naturally forces discussion of "what if things develop differently than expected?"
- A risk register (or "heat map") classifying risks by probability and severity is a practical tool that translates well from the private sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic is discussed in several reports as a case study where these principles proved relevant — the crisis exposed failures to integrate urgent short-term responses with longer-term strategic considerations, and failures of communication with citizens.

Why this matters broadly: The gap between how the private sector handles strategic risk and how governments prepare policy decisions remains large. Pergler's work is an early and practical attempt to bridge it, arguing that deliberative processes are a natural vehicle for doing so.

5. Process Design as Protection Against Distortion

A distinctive feature of the work is its sustained attention to how the *organization and process* of preparation can distort the *substance* of outcomes. The reports catalogue specific failure modes:

- **Power struggles overriding collaboration.** The preparation process can be captured by actors pursuing positional advantage rather than good outcomes. Deliberative design — with its emphasis on transparency, early inclusion,

and variant comparison — is explicitly framed as a countermeasure.

- **Late or excluded stakeholders.** When key actors (opposition, independent experts, citizen groups, affected communities) are brought in only to comment on a near-finished product, their input is structurally marginalized.
- **Procedural changes imposed without consultation.** Altering the rules of preparation mid-process, especially without deliberation, can be more damaging than a poor substantive decision.
- **Information filtering and withholding.** A core principle is that all emerging materials should be accessible to all participants from the beginning. The reports consistently argue that the source of information should offer everything uncensored, and each recipient should choose what to engage with.
- **Confusing urgency with speed.** Crisis situations (COVID being the illustrative case) tempt leaders into bypassing preparation processes. The reports argue that even under time pressure, a structured deliberative approach produces better results than improvisation — and that the failure to integrate short-term crisis response with longer-term strategy is itself a major risk.

Why this matters broadly: These failure modes are recognizable in any governance context. The contribution here is framing them not as individual lapses but as *systemic risks to the preparation process* that can and should be designed against.

6. The Role of the Coordinator

The reports propose a specific organizational innovation: an independent **coordinator** responsible for the procedural (not substantive) integrity of the preparation process. The coordinator:

- Proposes and monitors procedural changes, subject to approval.
- Tracks plans, timelines, and reporting across teams.
- Does not intervene in the content of the work.
- Reports directly to the commissioning authority (e.g., the government).

When no coordinator is appointed, their functions default to senior leaders — which the reports identify as a major and recurring source of problems, because leaders inevitably have substantive positions that compromise procedural neutrality.

Why this matters broadly: The separation of process management from substantive decision-making is a principle with wide applicability — from organizational design to international negotiations. It maps onto related ideas like the distinction between a facilitator and a chair, or the concept of process guardianship in complex multi-stakeholder initiatives.

7. Adaptation, Not Prescription

A recurring caution throughout the work is that deliberative preparation cannot be applied from a universal written manual. Each application requires adaptation to the specific context — the political environment, the institutional culture, the nature of the problem, and the experience of the participants. This is identified as the main practical difficulty of the approach, as opposed to more formulaic policy methodologies.

The reports document extensive experience with adaptation to Czech conditions — including the specific challenges of a post-communist institutional culture, strong power struggles within public administration, and a general distrust of participatory processes. But the underlying observation is universal: process design for complex decisions is inherently context-dependent, and treating it as a standardized checklist is a recipe for failure.

Connections to Related Concepts in English-Language Policy and Democratic Practice

This section was written by Claude AI, directed to take on the persona of an expert in policy development and democratic governance. It has not been reviewed by a human domain expert.

Pergler's work developed partly in parallel with, and partly in dialogue with, a broader international movement. This section maps the key ideas above to concepts and frameworks that English-speaking readers in policy and governance may already know, to help locate the work within a wider landscape.

Deliberative Democracy

The most direct connection is to the field of **deliberative democracy** — the idea that legitimate political decisions should emerge from informed, inclusive, reason-giving discussion among affected parties, not merely from voting or elite negotiation. The theoretical foundations were laid by Jürgen Habermas (discourse ethics, the public sphere) and further developed by scholars such as Joshua Cohen, James Bohman, and John Dryzek. Pergler's work is firmly within this tradition, and his literature cites these authors extensively.

What distinguishes Pergler's contribution is its emphasis on the *operational mechanics* of deliberation within government — how to actually organize the preparation of strategy documents and policy proposals so that deliberative principles are structurally embedded, rather than treated as an add-on consultation step. This is less theoretically oriented than much of the academic deliberative democracy literature, and more focused on the practical experience of making it work (and documenting why it often doesn't) inside public administration.

Deliberative Polling and Citizens' Assemblies

James Fishkin's **Deliberative Polling**[®] (Stanford University) is perhaps the best-known practical model of deliberative process in the English-speaking world. Fishkin is cited extensively in Pergler's reports, and the core insight is shared: that informed deliberation changes people's views and produces better collective judgments than uninformed opinion. The OECD's landmark 2020 report, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*, documented close to 300 representative deliberative processes worldwide — citizens' assemblies, juries, panels — and identified a growing "deliberative wave" that has been building since the 1980s and accelerating since 2010.

Pergler's approach differs from the Fishkin model and from citizens' assemblies in an important respect: he focuses less on randomly selected citizen panels deliberating on a specific question, and more on **how the professional apparatus of government prepares strategy documents and policy options** in a way that is deliberative from the outset. The two approaches are complementary — citizens' assemblies address who deliberates, while Pergler's work addresses how the materials those deliberators (or decision-makers) work with are prepared. That said, the OECD's Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes now develop the practical methodology of running such processes — including design choices, facilitation standards, and institutionalization options — in considerably more detail than these reports do.

The NCDD (National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation)

Pergler was a member of the US-based but global **National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation** (NCDD), a network of over 2,000 practitioners, scholars, and public officials founded in 2002. The NCDD serves as a clearinghouse for approaches including Sustained Dialogue, Appreciative Inquiry, World Café, and many others. Pergler's work shares the NCDD community's conviction that better processes of dialogue and deliberation can help bridge divides and improve collective decision-making — but is distinctive in its focus on *government strategy preparation* specifically, and on the Central European context.

Participatory and Collaborative Governance

The broader field of **participatory governance** — encompassing participatory budgeting (pioneered in Porto Alegre, Brazil), co-design, and collaborative policymaking — shares Pergler's emphasis on inclusion and transparency. What Pergler adds is a particular insistence on *variant comparison* as a structural discipline: not just "include more voices," but "ensure those voices produce meaningfully different options that can be compared on their merits." This makes the work more analytical and less purely procedural than some participatory governance frameworks.

Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA)

Readers familiar with **Regulatory Impact Assessment** — now standard practice across OECD countries — will recognize Pergler's insistence on comparing policy alternatives, estimating impacts, and including a "do nothing" baseline. RIA frameworks, as codified by the OECD, require problem definition, identification of alternatives, cost-

benefit analysis, and stakeholder consultation. Pergler's "null variant" maps directly onto the RIA requirement to assess the option of non-intervention.

Where Pergler goes further than standard RIA is in two respects: first, he insists on *probabilistic* impact estimation (acknowledging uncertainty rather than presenting a single expected outcome), drawing on risk analysis traditions from engineering and finance. Second, he treats the *process by which alternatives are generated* as itself a design problem requiring deliberative safeguards — whereas RIA frameworks tend to take the set of alternatives as given and focus on their assessment.

Strategic Foresight and Scenario Planning

Pergler's emphasis on preparing for multiple possible futures, on probabilistic thinking, and on avoiding single-point forecasts connects to the field of **strategic foresight** and **scenario planning** as practiced by organizations like the OECD (which has a Government Foresight Community), the World Economic Forum, and in the corporate sector by Shell and others. His integration of risk analysis with deliberative strategy preparation is an early attempt to bridge two communities — foresight/risk and democratic deliberation — that often operate in separate silos.

Yehezkel Dror and "The Capacity to Govern"

Among the most directly relevant intellectual predecessors cited in the reports is **Yehezkel Dror**, the Israeli political scientist whose works *The Capacity to Govern* (2001) and *Public Policymaking Re-examined* (1968) argued that governments systematically underperform in their capacity for strategic thinking and long-term decision-making. Pergler's practical program can be read as an attempt to operationalize Dror's diagnosis — building the institutional capacity for better strategic preparation through concrete process design.

Process Facilitation and the Coordinator Role

Pergler's proposed role of an independent **coordinator** — responsible for procedural integrity but barred from influencing content — maps onto established concepts in facilitation and process design. In the OECD's Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes, the independence and neutrality of facilitation is identified as a key design variable. In organizational development, the distinction between process consultation (Edgar Schein) and content expertise is well established. Pergler's contribution is applying this principle specifically to *government strategy preparation* and documenting why its absence is a recurring source of failure.

A Note on Context

Many of the individual ideas in Pergler's work — deliberative inclusion, variant comparison, risk-aware policy analysis — are now well-established in the international policy mainstream, developed in more detail by organizations like the OECD and by the growing community of deliberative democracy practitioners. The methodology endorsed by the Czech Government Council for Sustainable Development was, for a variety of reasons, not ultimately implemented in full in the Czech Republic. The distinctive value of these reports likely lies less in any single idea and more in the integrated perspective — combining deliberative process design, risk analysis, and attention to systemic failure modes of government preparation — and in the practical, sometimes hard-won observations drawn from decades of attempting to introduce these ideas within a specific institutional environment.

End of AI expert persona section.

About the Author

Přemysl ("Mýša/Misha") Pergler (1928–2026) worked, consulted, and taught across multiple continents. He originally worked at the VÚSE research institute in Prague, then shifted from electrical to general and social systems theory. In this domain, he was a Professor at UCLA, then worked for the Federal public service in Canada and founded an international consulting firm in Ottawa. Following the change in regime in Czechoslovakia in 1989, he returned to Prague. His work on deliberative strategy preparation in the Czech Republic was developed in collaboration with senior government officials (he worked as an Advisor to Czechoslovak President Václav Havel and then for several Czech ministries), endorsed by the Government Council for Sustainable Development (2010), and contributed to Government Resolution 318/2013 on strategic preparation methodology.

Sources: Seven reports (1994–2024) available at <http://www.balrisk.com/strategicka-prace.html>. These reports formed the basis for methodology approved by the Czech Government Council for Sustainable Development.